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AUTHOR Hindman, Jane E.
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ABSTRACT

College writing instructors' approaches may exacerbate students' problems in adopting academic discourse style by failing to consider that for basic writers the problem of writing in the university is the problem of appropriating power through a particular way of writing. Educators cannot afford to ignore such realities. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky created and implemented a curriculum designed to enable basic writing students to authorize and locate themselves in the university. However, that curriculum does not enable students to seek out actively the margins of academic discourse in the way that the curriculum intends. Furthermore, "remedial" or basic writing programs cling to decontextualized, atomistic pedagogies that disable the move to the margins that Bartholomae and Petrosky propose. The next progression from their curriculum is a course model whose subject material is discourse itself. Beginning from personal experience, students could examine the language used by their families, peer groups, or subcultures. They could examine such questions as: Who is authorized to speak in the discourse of any particular group?; or How is such authority recognized and practiced? Students could compare their theories with those of professionals. Such a model would enable students to examine the process by which educators authorize some types of discourse as "good" and de-authorize others. (SG)

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JaneE Hindman
English Department
Modern Languages Bldg. 445
University of Arizona 85721

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Gestures? We Don't Need Your Stinking Gestures!: Empowerment through Radical Teachers and Cultural Action for Freedom

The catalyst for my examination of basic writers and their gestures was provided by a serendipitous interface: soon after reading David Bartholomae's article "Writing on the Margins: The Concept of Literacy in Higher Education" I came across a particularly memorable student essay in a training manual for a recent Freshman Placement Exam grading session at the University of Arizona. The Bartholomae article described the dilemma for basic writers as one of "moving into and appropriating the specialized discourse of a privileged community. . .a community with its peculiar gestures of authority, its key terms and figures, its interpretive schemes" (69). The placement essay that caught my eye included some very quickly executed but ingenious sketches of the type that artists call gesture drawings. The four gestures drawings conveyed different postures toward the writing assignment: at the prompt, a figure with shrugged shoulders stated "work ethic, huh?" while in the margins of the page an exasperated figure with hand on hips said, "I wanted to write about ice cream!" My favorites were at the end of the essay: in the defiant posture arms folded across her chest with opposite hands cupping elbows, the figure declared "So there!" at the last line of the essay, while in an apparent afterthought and smaller gesture of friendliness at the very corner of the bottom of the last page, the final figure waved goodbye, saying "Just kidding. . ."

I remember that this essay received the highest possible rating, a four signifying honors placement. Through its "thorough development" and "obvious

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facility with language" in the actual written text's response to the prompt (which I've omitted here), as well as its "finely tuned sense of irony" displayed in the gesture drawings' sharp contrast to the serious and "high" tone of that written text, this placement exam clearly demonstrated the student's sophisticated awareness of her audience and of the kind of discourse expected at the university. Personally, I thought the writer had earned an honors placement simply because she was daring enough to thumb her nose at those of us who would be deciding her future in composition based on our reading of her thirty minute agonizing over the American belief in the value of the work ethic.

I respected that particular gesture of her defiance. And when it was juxtaposed with Bartholomae's description of basic writers, the gesture lead me to a realization: though I have witnessed many developmental writers learning to make myriad and often successful gestures to authority in their writing (and about authority in their conversations behind my back), I had never seen them pull off or even attempt a gesture such as those in the sketches. I began to wonder: could it be that the pedagogical approaches I, we, take to teaching basic writers are actually exacerbating their problems with moving into and appropriating the discourse of the academy?

I think so if the approaches we take do not consider that for basic writers the problem of writing in the university is the problem of appropriating power and authority through a particular way of writing. We cannot afford to ignore or neglect these realities. As Bartholomae points out to us,

> the relationship of the writer to the institutions within which he writes [is]. . .central rather than peripheral.. . . [Consequently,] we cannot assume that we can teach the sentence or the paragraph as though they were context-free.. . .We must put marginal students immediately within representative academic projects (in courses like the seminars we offer to advanced students) so that we can see (and they can see) the position

> of their writing within the context of those varieties of writing that enable the work of the academy. (70)

Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky have done just that in their creation and implementation of a curriculum--described in their book Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts--specifically designed to enable basic writing and reading students to authorize and locate themselves in the university. Because Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum involves students in the creation of a discipline, because it is not imitative or atomistic, de-contextualized or a-structural, it enables what Freire calls "thought language. . .the possibility of the act of knowing through his praxis, by which man transforms reality" (158). As a result, Bartholomae and Petrosky's claims that their course will empower students to locate and authorize themselves are more than justified.

It's their final claim in Facts, however, with which I want to take issue here, their claim that by the end of their course basic writers

> . . .have learned (and perhaps in a way their "mainstream" counterparts cannot) that successful readers and writers actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university. (305)

I am arguing that, as empowering as Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum may be, it does not enable students to seek out actively the margins of the discourse of the university in the way that the curriculum hopes. Unlike the outside-to-inside-movement of other basic writing pedagogues, the curriculum proposed in Facts does begin from the "inside" of the practices of the academic community, does enable students to be insiders in their performance of those practices. Yet I doubt that merely creating a discipline will illuminate for basic writing students the institutional context within which they are being denied access; I doubt such a project will reveal the processes of self-authorization being practiced by their composition teachers, will

enable the students to find and inhabit the borders of the system which limits them.

For, I am arguing, another kind of "enabling" is going on in the tenacity with which "remedial" or basic writing programs cling to their decontextualized, atomistic pedagogues, an enabling of the status quo within our discipline that dis<u>able</u>s the voluntary move to the margins that Bartholomae and Petrosky propose. Not only does most of our pedagogy involving these "marginalized" students fail to ever give real power or place or freedom to them, but also it does not illuminate the source of our own authority, the context of our own writing within the academy.

Consider how Freire evaluates the practice of labeling students (illiterates) as "marginal":

> Those who consider them marginal must. . .recognize the existence of a [structural dimension of] reality to which they are marginal.. . .But being 'outside of' or 'marginal to' necessarily implies a movement of the one said to be marginal from the center, where he was, to the periphery. This movement, which is an action, presupposes in turn not only an agent but his reasons.. . .<u>Who is the author of this movement from the center of the structure to its margin?</u> Do so-called marginal men, among them the illiterates, make the decision to move out to the periphery? (161, emphasis added)

Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum may indeed illustrate to the student how to transform her own reality in the sense of the facts of the subject--be it adolescence or work. But it does not unveil for her the context within which she has been denied a place or authority in the university; the course does not empower the basic writer to identify the authors who have tried to prevent her movement from the center to the margins of our own discursive practices. Freire further explains that

> In fact. . .the social structure as a whole does not "expel," nor is marginal man a "being outside of." He is, on the contrary, a "being inside of," within the social structure, and in a dependent relationship to those whom we call falsely autonomous beings.. . .These men, illiter-

> ate or not, are, in fact, not marginal.. . .They are not "beings outside of"; they are "beings <u>for</u> another." (Freire 162, my emphasis)

In other words, the notion of marginal students as "marginal" is essential to the functioning of our own system; our own autonomy and place are themselves dependent upon someone else's dependence on our authority to assign location. Mike Rose characterizes this mutual dependence as follows:

> The function of labelling certain material remedial [or basic] in higher education is to keep in place the hard fought for. . .distinction between college and secondary work. "Remedial" gains its meaning, then, in a political more than a pedagogical universe. (Rose, "Language" 349)

A further illustration of this dysfunction in the educational system (and by implication within our discipline) is seen in Foucault's "The Discourse of Language:"

> In its [the educational system's] distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (227)

Because of this political and systemic context surrounding the labelling and assigning of place to marginalized, basic, remedial students, these students cannot be the agents of their own marginalization unless and until they are able to recognize (<u>not</u> misrecognize as the rest of us do) their position at the center of the system that gains its authority by de-authorizing them.[1]

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[1] For this term "misrecognition," especially as it relates to "gesturing," I am indebted to Bill Epstein's definition of "gesture" (i.e. "a way of sanctioning critical activity under the cover of some other activity") and to his explanation: "because gesturing attempts to transfer authority. . .from a human body. . .to a reified sign. . .seemingly stabilized within an autonomous, disciplinary matrix, it is also a way of <u>misrecognizing</u> the participation of individual critics in the community of professional practice. If practice is, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, a contingent temporal activity poised on the margin between discursive and non-discursive behavior that can only be 'misrecognized,' then gesturing is one of the characteristic forms of

So, I want to push Bartholomae and Petrosky's curriculum a step further: I suggest a course model very much like theirs but whose subject material is discourse itself, the discourse of the students and of the university. I suggest a full length academic project for basic writers, a curriculum whose content centers on language, rather than on the topic of adolescence or work.

Beginning from their own personal experiences, students in such a course could examine the language used by their families, their peer groups, and/or their sub-cultures. Their semester-long, seminar project would consider such questions as the following: Who is authorized to speak in the discourse of any particular group? How is such authority recognized and practiced? What privileges does the authority provide? How do the dominant of the group protect that privilege? Drawing from their early writing about their own experiences as "case studies," students could begin to theorize about the answers to such questions within specific language systems, that is within the discourse communities that they have examined. Later on in the semester, students would compare their theories with those of the professionals; which in some cases will mean with <u>ours</u>, with our expert opinions and evaluations of student writers especially as these opinions are expressed in placement exam settings. Thus, after seeking out the materials necessary to observing our placement exam expertise (e.g., audio tapes of holistic training sessions, sample student exams and the placements they earned, interviews with graders), students could compare their theories with those of the specialists, the professors of English, those whose self-authorization put the students in the

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this behavior--'a truth who sole meaning and function are to deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie which would deceive no one, were not everyone determined to deceive <u>himself</u> [or herself].'" (64-65)

basic writing courses in the first place.

Such a model would enable students to examine the very process by which we at the university [mis]recognize and authorize certain types of discourse as "good" writing and de-authorize others. This study would problematize the existential situation of language use itself, especially as that use shows up in the university. What better way to promote self-reflexivity and linguistic awareness, or as Friere urges us, to "relate speaking the word to transforming reality" (Freire 164)? Through such practice, the students may find the real power necessary to move to the boundaries of language use at the university, for they will certainly become situated such that they can see how our own authority, the very authority that has kept them at the mercy of a disabling system, is of our own construction. Not only will they learn how to gesture to that authority if they so choose, but also--in an attitude similar to that of the bandits who rob Bogart in Treasure of the Sierra Madres or to the more lighthearted gestures in the drawings of the placement essay that caught my eye--they may develop the wherewithal to demonstrate to us that when we are in their territory, they get to call the shots, they get to decide on the gestures they want to use.

So, I want to urge us to be--in the T-shirt claim popular at conventions like these--"radical teachers." But I mean "radical" in the sense that Jim Merod intends when he explains that "the radical's job is to prepare intellectual access for anyone who wants to comprehend the actual conditions--including the institutional conditions of authority and power--that separate people from the democratic control of their environments" (188). For such "radical" pedagogy as this is the way not only for our students to know and locate their places at the university but for us to do the same.

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